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A NOTE ON THE *HÁRBARÐSLJÓÐ*

In the famous "flyting" between Odin (*Hárbarðr*) and Thor, two divergent forces of religious worship meet in conflict. Odin, god of the Vikings, meets and in a strife of words vanquishes the clumsy and stupid Thor, god of the peasants. Odin represents a higher state of intellectual and cultural development, while the attainments of Thor are limited to his physical prowess and courage. Thus two religious cults (that of Odin and that of Thor) and possibly two classes of society ¹ (the viking and the peasant) are arrayed against each other.

Odin is here clad in the garb of a ferryman under the name of *Hárbarðr* (Hoary Beard). He refuses to allow Thor to cross the fjord to which the latter has come after a sojourn in the East in Jotunheim. Soon a quarrel arises and hot words follow, each seeking in brazen bravado to out-do the other in boastful accounts of his exploits and successful achievements. On each occasion Odin shows his superiority in shrewdness and intellect, recounting exploits with varied themes in which he discloses an originality and versatility that stand out in bold relief against the monotonous and unvaried tone of Thor's stories about his mighty Mjólnir and his many victories over the stupid giants.

After Thor tells the story of how he slew the stone-giant Hrungrnir, he asks Odin what brave deed the latter has done to compare with this. Odin retorts (16): "I was with *Fjölvarr* ² five long winters on that island which is called *Algrøn* (Evergreen); there we did fight and slay men and put our valor to many a test and kiss many a maid." This last remark evidently leads Thor to inquire further into Odin's career with especial reference to his love affairs. "How did your women

¹ Finnur Jónsson, however, vigorously rejects this theory. *Den islandske Litteraturs Historie*, p. 52.

² *Fjölvari* (B) occurs only here. Nothing seems to be known about this mythical figure or the episode here related. The name is evidently of mythical origin, composed of *fjöl*, (very) and *varr*, adj. (attentive, cautious) i. e. *one who is very cautious*. Cf. *Fjöl-sviðr*, *one who is very swift, adroit, wise*, applied to Odin himself in the *Grimnismál*, 47. Cf. also *Fjolsvinnsmál*.

turn out," says Thor (17). Odin then tells him how he outwitted these women both in shrewdness and in the game of love (18).*

Hrbljð. 17.

"Hverso snúnuþu yðr konor yðrar?"

Hrbljð. 18.

"Sparkar atto ver konor,
ef oss at spökum yrði;
horscar atto ver konor,
ef oss hollar vęri;
þęr or sandi
sima undo
oc or dali diupom
grund um grofo;
varþ ec þeim einn ęllom
ęfri at raþom,
hvilda ec hia þeim systrom siau
oc hafða ec geþ þeirra alt oc gaman."

One difficulty in the interpretation of this stanza consists in the double meanings of words,³ but since these double meanings nearly all refer to the same thing, on the one hand to *shrewdness*, *cleverness* and on the other to *sex-love*, the matter is greatly simplified. But the general sense is at first sight somewhat obscured by the conditions contrary to fact

* This play on words is especially conspicuous in stanza 30 of the *Hárbardsljóð* in which Odin cleverly answers Thor's boast when the latter glories in the defeat which he has inflicted upon the sons of Svárangr. Odin retorts with a similar victory of an erotic nature but at the same time uses a phraseology which may (parallel to Thor's victory) be interpreted in terms of warlike activity. The manuscript readings bring out the ambiguous nature of the terms he uses (cf. Niedner, p. 16, Foot note 1.).

R. *ein hveria*, a Valkyria (fem. to *einheri*), cf. Bugge, foot note to text. A. *einheriu*, a certain (maid).

R. *ena lindhvito*, one who bears a white shield, i. e. a Valkyria. A. *hina línhvitu*, one white as linen, i. e. a fair maid.

R. *lęng þing*, long 'thing', i. e. the assemblies of the gods. A. *launþing*, secret meetings, trysts.

* Citations are from Bugge's edition, whose orthography is also retained.

(ef—yrði, ef—vēri), which, however, are only rhetorical conditions ("phraseologisch", a mode of expression frequently used in the Elder Edda ⁴) and therefore may be greatly clarified in translation by the use of independent clauses in English.

The first four verses serve as a general answer to Thor's question and are further extended and particularized in the remaining verses of the stanza.

Let us analyze the first four verses:

Sparkar atto ver konor
 ef oss at *spøkum* yrði;
horscar atto ver konor,
 ef oss *hollar* vēri.

The four adjectives *sparkar*, *spøkum*, *horscar*, *hollar* all bear the alliterative syllables and contain the theme of the whole stanza; the first two verses referring to the idea of *shrewdness*, the last two to *sex-love*. The two conditional clauses are in reality conclusions stated in the form of conditions, being mere extensions of the statements made in verses 1 and 3. Therefore, the adjectives in 1 and 3 are in sense repeated in the conditions: *sparkar* in *at spøkum* and *horscar* in *hollar*.

Hollar (hollr) has no other meaning than that of *devoted, well disposed*, a meaning which *horscar* (horskr) in the previous verse has already expressed altho this word may also mean *wise, shrewd* ⁵ (suggesting the theme of the two foregoing verses).

At spøkum means here *wise, shrewd*. *Sparkar* (R. spárkar) is a ἄπαρ Λεγόμενον but its cognate ⁶ exists in Modern Norwegian

⁴ Cf. Hvm. 4, Fáfn. 40, Hárbli. 34, Lokas. 33, H. Hj. 21, etc.

⁵ Fritzner *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog* p. 45: *horskr* adj. 1) klog, forstandig. 2) kjærlig, venlig, om Kvinde, Hvm. 96, 5. 102, 8. Rigsþ. 39, 7.

⁶ Cf. Bugge, *Norroen Fornkvaedi*, foot note to text. Cf. *Norw-Dänisch Etym. Wörterb.* Falk and Torp: anord. *spark* n. "das treten, trampeln," *sparka*, "mit dem Fusse stossen;" verwandt ist anord, *sprøkla*, "zappeln." Cf. Modern Norwegian and Danish, *sparke* and Modern Swedish, *sparka*, to kick.

dialects with short radical vowel (*sparka*, to kick). Gering gives *munter, lebhaft*. According to the context of the passage the word seems to mean *adroit, skilful* (perhaps as the result of some quick lively motion as is suggested by its cognate *sparka*, to kick), and then perhaps in a more general sense *shrewd*, which meaning is substantiated by *at spökum* just as the meaning of *horscar* is repeated in *hollar* (i. e. *loving, well disposed*).

Literally, then, the lines read: "we had skilful (or *shrewd*) women (i. e. they would really have been shrewd) if they had turned out to be as shrewd as we were; we had loving women (i. e. they would really have been) if they had been loving toward us." The conditions are only rhetorical, each being an extension of the previous verse, therefore the real sense of the passage is: "our women were very clever but not so clever as we, they were very loving but not disposed to give *us* their love".

The theme of these four verses is, then, Odin's contest with these women (*konor*) whom he not only outwits in cleverness (*sparkar, at spökum*) but also (as the last two verses of the stanza show) seduces to illicit love (*horskar, hollar*). Such a feat proves his native cleverness and attractiveness of personality in which he takes a special delight, since the primitive Thor, with his rude and unattractive appearance, is as little capable of winning the love of a capricious maiden as the giant Thrym the love of the goddess Freya.

But who were these *konor*? Evidently Odin here refers to some particular escapade which he has had with "lewd witches" (which is implied in the word *konor*⁷). In stanza 20 he again refers to his relations with witches (*myrcrīþor*) whom

- ⁷ Fritzner (p. 325): kona {
- 1) kvinde.
 - 2) kvinde med hvilken en mand søger eller har samleie i eller udenfor ægteskab.
 - 3) kvinde som ikke længere er *mær* eller *jungfrú* men har *spíllt sínun meydómi*.
- kaupa sér konu: tilkjøbe sig samleie med en kvinde ved betaling.

he succeeded in alluring from the love of other men (*verom*^a) :

“Miclar manvelar
ec hafða víþ myrcríþor
þa er ec velta þer fra verom ;”

and in stanza 30 he further boasts of a secret meeting with some fair maid whom he seduces to illicit relations :

“Ec var austr
oc víþ einhveria dǫmþac,
lęc ec víþ ena línhvito
oc launþing haþac,
gladdac ena gullbiorto,
gamni mér unði.”

Such illicit relations with women on the part of Odin are not at all uncommon. It was just exactly such a *launþing* (secret meeting) which he sought with the Billings maid in the *Hávamál*, except that on account of the ethical nature of this poem his advances were repulsed and he was compelled to retreat in shame. In fact, Odin uses the same phraseology in the *Hárbarðsljóð* as in the *Hávamál*, when he refers to the consummation of his love ; “and I had (i. e. enjoyed) all their love and passion.”

Hbrljð. 18.

oc hafða ec geð þeirra alt oc gaman

Hvm. 99.

hitt ec hugða,
at ec hafa mynda
geð hennar alt oc gaman.

and again in the *Hávamál* (161) when he speaks of winning a maid's love by magic song :

Hvm. 161.

þat kann ec íþ sextánda,
ef ec vil ins svinna mans
hafa geð alt oc geman.

That Odin often outwitted witches is supported by the

^a *Verom* is not necessarily used in the sense of *legitimate husbands*, but may also refer to men in any relation whatsoever, legitimate or otherwise. Cf. *Vafth.* 55, þu ert ę visastr *vera* (referring to Odin), *Lokas.* 46, þa er vago *verar*, when *men* fought.

Hávamál (155, Ljóðatal) where he even caused them to lose their proper forms and their understanding:

Hvm. 155.

þat kann ec iþ tíunda,
 ef ec se tunriþor
 leica lopti a :
 ec sva vinc,
 at þer villar fara
 sinna heim hama,
 sinna heim huga.

So too in the Hárbarðsljóð (20) he shows his superiority over witches, whom he succeeded in alluring from the love of other men (as stated above). But here his escapade with witches is brought in connection with his relation to the giant Hlébarð whom he likewise seems to have outwitted, in this case by the aid of a magic wand (*gambantein*) which he has got from the possession of the giant.

Hrbljð. 20.

“harþan jotun
 ec hugða Hlebarð vera,
 gaf hann mer gambantein,
 en ec velta hann or viti.”

In the Hávamál (151, Ljóðatal) Odin tells how, if a thane wound him “with the roots of a wet tree” (evidently a sort of *gambanteinn*), he can make him who does this (i. e. his enemy) suffer evil instead of himself:

Hvm. 151.

þat kann ec et setta,
 ef mic sęrir þegn
 a rótom rás viðar,
 oc þann hal
 er mic heipta qveþr,
 þann eta mein heldr enn mic.

Evidently this is exactly what Odin does to the giant Hlébarð in whose possession the magic wand seems originally to have been (*gaf hann mer gambantein*).

Therefore, it would seem that in the Hárbarðsljóð (18), the stanza under discussion, Odin must have employed a similar sort of magic to outwit the seven sisters. That he did em-

ploy magic for such a purpose is substantiated by the *Hávamál* (161, *Ljóðatal*) where he says that if he wishes to gain the love of a maid he knows how to sing a magic song that will bewitch her senses and set her heart in a whirl.

Hvm. 161.

þat kann ec iþ sextánda,
ef ec vil ins svinna mans
hafa ged alt oc gaman:
hugi ec hverfi
hvítarmri kono
oc sny ec hennar ǫllum sęfa.

It is just this kind of magic which he employs in the *Hárbarðsljóð* (18) and which proves to be more potent than the magic which these women (*konor*) had at their command. So effective is Odin's magic that altho these women perform practically impossible feats he outdoes them all and wins their love to boot. It is this cleverness which he wishes to impress upon the simple minded Thor and which he wishes to contrast with Thor's childish innocence in such matters.

"They wound ropes from sand and dug ground from the deep dale",⁹ says Odin "yet I alone worsted them all."

Hrbljð. 18.

þęr or sandi
síma undo
oc or dali diupom
grund um grofo;
varþ ec þeim einn ǫllum
ęfri at raþom,
hvilda ec hja þeim systrom siau
oc hafda ec geþ þeirra alt oc gaman.

Undoubtedly we have in the verse—*ęfri at raþom*—a double implication again. The ambiguity lies in the fact that Odin worsted these women in two different ways; namely, that he not only outdid them in clever tricks but also seduced them to improper relations even tho they at first were not disposed

⁹ For a discussion of these activities see: Detter and Heinzel, *Sæmundar Edda*, p. 217; Niedner, *Zur Liederedda*, 254. Cf. also Sn. E. I., 4.

to give him their love.¹⁰ Both these respects are stated in the initial verses:

“Sparkar atto ver konor,
ef oss at spökum yrði;
horscar atto ver konor
ef oss hollar veri.”

which constitute the theme of the whole stanza and a general answer to Thor's question. The result of Odin's relations to these women is already implied in the conditions contrary to fact (*ef—yrði, ef—veri*) and later definitely stated in, *varþ ec þeim einn þlóm efri at raþom*. The first two verses have to do with general cleverness (*sparkar, at spökum*) and the next two with the relations of sex-love (*horscar, hollar*) in both of which respects Odin is superior (*efri at raþom*) to these women. The whole stanza is, therefore, a well formed and consistent unit. It is to be regretted, however, that as yet nothing has been discovered which throws light upon this particular escapade of Odin with the seven¹¹ sisters.

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¹⁰ Cf. discussion of verse 4 above, *ef oss hollar veri*.

¹¹ It seems probable that the number seven (*sjau*) is here used as a conventional designation for *many*. In the first place Odin wished to impress upon Thor the extent of his victory and the odds with which he had to contend. Furthermore, *sjau* serves as an alliterative syllable with *systrom* in the third verse of the *ljóðahattr*. It is, therefore, probable that the number seven (*sjau*) is not used in a literal sense.

In the *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma*, 27, Sigurd makes prophetic reference to *seven* sons whom, after his death, Gudrun is to bear by another husband. The number *seven* is here again used merely in the sense of *many*, in comparison with whom his only son, Sigmund, is superior.

Sig. 27.

Riþraþ þeim siþan,
þott *siau* alir,
systorsonr
slicr at þingi.

“Never shall they (the sons of Gjuki) have such a sister's son to ride to the 'thing', tho thou shalt bear *seven* sons.”

Cf. Brynhild's account of the *eight* Valkyrie sisters (Heilreiþ Brynhildar, 6). Also *Kormákssaga* VII, segðu aldrege siþan, þott *sjau* um dag fregner, (Detter u. Heinzel. 468).